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Fish and Wildlife Agencies Working With Local Partners to Restore Shad in Charles River

WALTHAM- The Department of Fish and Game (DFG), its Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) stocked about 464,760 American shad fry into the Charles River today as part of the effort to restore the largest member of the herring family in Massachusetts's rivers that historically supported native shad populations.

Once abundant in Massachusetts, especially in larger river systems such as the Charles, Connecticut, Merrimack, and Neponset, American shad were eliminated or reduced to remnant populations over the last century in all Massachusetts rivers where they occurred, due to construction of dams, water pollution, and over-fishing. Water quality improvements, construction of fish passage facilities, and regulation of fishing have recently resulted in restoration of shad in the Connecticut and Merrimack systems, and state and federal agencies are now working to restore shad into the Charles River.

"It is great to see that the fish we stocked in previous years are growing in the Charles, and we look forward to the possibility that we can restore the species to its native spawning habitat and perhaps establish a sport fishery in the future," said DFG Commissioner Mary Griffin. "We are extremely grateful to have the support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and help of non-profit environmental organizations such as the Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership, the Charles River Watershed Association, and the New England Aquarium in our effort to restore shad in the Charles River."

The objectives of the of the American shad propagation project are to restore viable populations of American shad to the Charles River (and secondarily the Neponset River), and to create local sport fisheries. The project is a long-term collaborative effort between the DFG's Division of Marine Fisheries and the USFWS Central New England Fishery Resources Office (USFWS-CNEFRO). It includes the development of a shad fry stocking program in conjunction with fish passage improvements.

"We are pleased to be able to assist the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in the restoration of American shad to the Charles River," said Wendi Weber, Deputy Regional Director of the Northeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We are always excited about partnerships that give us the opportunity to utilize our fisheries expertise. This work that is being conducted, and the science and technology that are being developed and advanced through this partnership, can also be directed at other watersheds that once supported American shad populations in the region. We look forward to continuing to work to enhance and restore populations of migratory fish in the Charles River and other watersheds in the Commonwealth."

The fry stocking program is modeled after successful programs implemented by Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania for restoring shad to the tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. Broodstock shad for the Massachusetts program are obtained from the Merrimack River, where the shad population has rebounded over the past several decades, likely due to water quality improvements and the construction of more efficient fish passage structures on hydropower dams.

"We seldom take time to reflect on the remarkable achievements we've made over the past decade. A clean Boston Harbor has become an engine of growth not just for the city, but for fish and wildlife. A cleaner Charles has become an engine of growth for both Boston and Cambridge, for recreation on the water, and now, for a re-established wild fishery. Environmental investments, it turns out, are investments in us, our future, and a restored natural world," said Bob Zimmerman, Executive Director of the Charles River Watershed Association.

The Charles River is the primary target for restoration of shad in Massachusetts due to the availability of spawning and rearing habitat, functioning fishways, and the historical significance of shad in the system. The partners hope to eventually restore an adult population of about 30,000 in the Charles River.

In 2008, 740 adult shad were taken from the Essex Dam fish lift on the Merrimack River. Of these, 586 fish were sent to the USFWS's Nashua National Fish Hatchery in New Hampshire and 154 were transferred to the North Attleboro National Fish Hatchery. The Nashua hatchery produced 583,738 fry this year, while North Attleboro produced 368,442 in its first year of rearing shad. Including today's total, about 952,180 American shad have been stocked into the Charles River this summer.

In 2007, approximately 900 adult broodstock were obtained from the Merrimack River and brought to the Nashua hatchery. In June and July of 2007, 660,000 fry produced by the adult fish were stocked into the Charles River. In 2006, 703 broodstock were collected below the Essex dam following a historic flood in mid-May, and they produced about 1.8 million fry for stocking. The warmer water as a result of the flood conditions resulted in more productive spawning. Surveys conducted in the fall of 2006 and 2007 by USFWS and DMF staff found large schools of juvenile shad and river herring between the boat launch at Woerd Avenue and the Moody Street Dam in Waltham, indicating survival and growth of the stocked fish.

Beginning in 2009, adult shad returning to the Charles River will be sampled and examined to determine if they were stocked fish. The presence of a greater number of naturally-spawned individuals as compared to hatchery-spawned individuals will indicate stocking success. The partners hope to see adult shad returning to the Charles River by 2010.

The New England Aquarium, a supporter of the shad restoration effort, began exhibiting American shad at its Boston facility in 2007, also using fish from the USFWS hatchery in Nashua. The Aquarium's exhibit includes about 1,200 shad mixed with 1,200 menhaden. The educational display details the history of shad in New England and efforts underway to bring shad back to its native habitat.

The Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership has provided funds for nets used to capture shad in the Merrimack River as well as other equipment for the effort to re-establish the species in the Charles River. The Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA) has assisted USFWS and DMF in the American shad restoration efforts by monitoring the Charles River prior to release events to help project fish survival rates, and following release events to document habitat conditions. CRWA has also worked to repair and maintain fish passage along the Charles - especially fish ladders at dams - so adult shad are able to return to the river to spawn. CRWA's mission involves continually promoting a clean Charles River which will be able to support a healthy shad population.

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